

# Sports

**Blaney wins first career NASCAR Cup race at Pocono Raceway**



**Bradley's stunning early goal helps US to 1-1 tie at Mexico**



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WI STUMBLE TO LOW TARGET TO LEVEL AFGHAN SERIES

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NASHVILLE: Phil Kessel #81 of the Pittsburgh Penguins celebrates with the Stanley Cup Trophy after they defeated the Nashville Predators 2-0 in Game Six of the 2017 NHL Stanley Cup Final at the Bridgestone Arena on Sunday in Nashville, Tennessee. — AFP

## PENGUINS DOWN PREDATORS TO RETAIN STANLEY CUP

LOS ANGELES: The Pittsburgh Penguins beat the Nashville Predators 2-0 on Sunday to clinch back-to-back Stanley Cup crowns in the first such title defense in nearly 20 years.

Patric Hornqvist fired Pittsburgh into the lead with 1:35 left in the final period to silence a raucous home crowd in Nashville who had roared on their team, who ultimately fell to a 4-2 loss in the series.

Hornqvist's killer blow—which deflected off Pekka Rinne—left Nashville exposed as they chased the game for an equaliser. With the Predators goal empty, it was left to Carl Hagelin to score the coup de grace with a breakthrough, triggering wild celebrations on the Penguins bench.

The Penguins became the first team to defend the Stanley Cup since the Detroit Red Wings achieved the feat in 1998. Pittsburgh star Sidney Crosby, who was

named the MVP of the series, said the Penguins had set themselves a goal of emulating Detroit at the start of the season.

"It's pretty special, to be able to share this with this group of guys," Crosby said. "A good chunk of the team were returning but for the new guys it's pretty special."

"This was our goal at the beginning of the year—we knew that it hadn't been done in a long time. So to be able to accomplish it is a great feeling," Crosby said. Pittsburgh had been buoyed by their emphatic performance in Game 5, when they romped to a 6-0 win to take a 3-2 lead in the best-of-seven series.

"I think all playoffs long we got better as the series went on and we tried to do that in this series," Crosby said. Penguins coach Mike Sullivan praised the work ethic of his team. "You don't win championships without character, and I believe we have it in abundance in

our dressing room," Sullivan said.

"This coaching staff is so appreciative of this group of players and what they go through. We push them hard to try to get the best out of them, and these guys embrace every challenge we give them."

But Sullivan reserved special praise for Penguins star and MVP Crosby. "With what Sid has been able to accomplish in his career to this point would put him in the company of the all-time greats," Sullivan said. "He's a guy that just knows how to win. And so he's done it in all different venues, whether it be the NHL and Stanley Cups to the World Cup to the Olympics."

Hornqvist's goal was his fifth of the postseason and came after he collected the puck after Justin Schultz's wide shot.

Nashville made a desperate challenge to overturn the goal for goalie interference, but the call stood after

a review. Hagelin then grabbed the second of his play-off campaign to the dismay of the Bridgestone Arena crowd, already seething after a Predators goal was disallowed in the second period. Towels and pompoms rained down onto the ice as Pittsburgh's players celebrated their win. Predators had already hurled a number of catfish on the ice throughout the game.

Matt Murray stopped 27 shots for Pittsburgh, including four crucial blocks when Nashville failed to make the most of 3:28 of power-play time in the second period. Rinne meanwhile had 27 saves on 28 shots, losing for just the second time on home ice in the playoffs.

Earlier, Nashville appeared to score early in the second period when Colton Sissons jabbed home from a rebound. The officials disallowed the goal however, stating that the whistle had blown before Sissons scored. — AFP

## IRAN TARGETS WORLD CUP SPOT AS CHINA AND QATAR TARGET SURVIVAL

SEOUL: Iran could become just the second team to advance through qualifying for the 2018 World Cup - after Brazil - while China and Qatar could be officially eliminated from contention in Asian qualifiers this week.

Led by former Real Madrid and Portugal coach Carlos Queiroz, Iran has appeared at four World Cups but never managed back-to-back qualifications. Should Iran, four points clear at the top of Group A, defeat Uzbekistan in Tehran in front of what should be a capacity crowd of 100,000 on Monday night, then it will secure a spot with two games remaining.

"We know there is still work to do but we have worked hard to get in a good position," Queiroz, who took the job in 2011, told The Associated Press. "We don't always have the same preparations that other big Asian countries have so it will be a great achievement to make it to the World Cup again."

Iran has conceded just six goals in seven games in the third round of qualification, from which the top two teams in both groups get automatic spots at Russia 2018. The two third-place finishers enter a playoff series.

"It will not be easy against Uzbekistan but we hope we can do it," Queiroz said. "We have been ranked as the No. 1 Asian team by FIFA for over four years and we have more players in Europe than ever before."

Today, South Korea can take a step to a ninth successive World Cup with a win in Qatar. The Taeguk Warriors sit in second, four points below Iran and one above Uzbekistan, but a series of indifferent performances has raised the possibility of missing out on the World Cup for the first time since 1982.

Against Qatar - the recent diplomatic rift in the region meant that Korea traveled from United Arab Emirates to Doha via Kuwait on Saturday - defeat would see the team's German coach Uli Stielike come under increasing pressure.

A 0-0 draw with Iraq in a friendly last week resulted in harsh criticism of the South Koreans, who had no shots on target. "The result was not good against Iraq but the atmosphere in the team is fine," Son Heung-min, who scored 21 goals in the English Premier League season with Tottenham Hotspur. "I also did not play well against Iraq but we are prepping well for Qatar and we all know how important it is."

Qatar, host of the 2022 World Cup, is last in Group A and already unable to finish in the top two in the group. Failure to win will officially end its already slim hopes of taking the playoff spot.

In the other Group A game on Tuesday, Syria hosts China in the neutral venue of Malaysia. Syria has an outside chance of third place and is four points behind Uzbekistan. China must win or its faint hopes of automatic qualification will end, and even the play-offs could be out of reach.

"It is totally within our capabilities to defeat Syria," China coach Marcello Lippi said after his team thrashed the Philippines 8-1 in a friendly last week. "If we lose to Syria both at home and away, then we deserve to be eliminated."

Three teams are level atop Group B with 16 points after Australia defeated Saudi Arabia 3-2 last week. That gives Japan a chance to move three points clear in top spot if it beats Iraq in a game played on neutral turf in Tehran.

Japan will be without Shinji Kagawa of Borussia Dortmund who was injured in a warm-up 1-1 draw against Syria, and coach Vahid Halilhodzic is expecting a tough time in Tehran.

"Everyone in Japan thinks that qualification for the World Cup is going to be no problem," Halilhodzic said. "But I'll warn everyone, it is not going to be easy."

In the other Group B match Thailand, already out of contention, is looking for a first win in this stage at home to United Arab Emirates. - AP



PARIS: France's forward Ousmane Dembele (C) controls the ball during a training session at the Stade de France stadium in Saint-Denis, north of Paris, yesterday on the eve of the friendly football match against England. — AFP